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‘Godless people’ and dead bodies: materiality and the morality of atheist materialism

Jacob Copeman & Johannes Quack

Abstract (147 words):

Professed atheists are by no means the only people who donate their bodies, yet the practice is strikingly prevalent in a variety of atheist circles across time and geographical region. We concentrate here on the Indian case, exploring body donation as a key instance of the material culture of atheism. Recent moves to reinvigorate study of the material culture of religion are to be welcomed, but should be extended to irreligion as a means of addressing the longstanding irony that sees scholars represent materialism as an abstract doctrine and, hence, as immaterial. Body donation – as a personal act – might be considered an intimate objectification of materialism that, dialectically, both evidences and forms it. Moreover, body donation has come to form a key indicator of the morality of materialism, and as such has come to act as a key component of atheist impression management, in India and elsewhere.

Key words:

materialism, material culture, morality, India, body donation, atheism, nonreligion

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‘Godless people’ and dead bodies: materiality and the morality of atheist materialism

In this essay we seek to elucidate the practical, moral, and ideological dimensions of body donation¹ by professed atheists as an instance of their material culture *par excellence*. Professed atheists are by no means the only people who donate their bodies, yet the practice is strikingly prominent - widely promoted and enacted - in a variety of atheist circles across time and geographical region. We consider here how and why this gift of matter and of death has become such an act of concentrated significance for many atheists, suggesting that this is consequent on its simultaneous fulfillment of a number of different ‘atheist objectives’. We enumerate the varied nature of its recipients, while also seeking to show how body donation comes to form a kind of metonym for atheism itself. And since the *matter* – the material composition – of the atheist gift is so central, our analysis of it cannot but be at the same time an analysis of the material culture of atheism; we focus, in other words, on the materiality of atheist materialism.

“Materialism” is treated here as a “folk” term partly characterised by what it rejects, i.e. belief in “immaterial” entities such as God, soul, spirits, any kind of miraculous materialisation, etc. At its core lies the conviction Weber described as central to processes of disenchantment, namely, that the world is – in principle – explainable, and therefore controllable, and that there are no incalculable, mysterious, supernatural forces (Weber 1964: 317). But importantly, we do not treat materialism *only* as a negative mode of belief. We concentrate here on the vitality of materialism’s material culture, arguing that material enactment and demonstration – professed materialists’ engagements with materials – are at least as constitutive of materialism as ‘belief’ in it. We are interested in the *constitutive materiality* of materialism. Recent moves to reinvigorate study of the material culture of religion (e.g. Keane 2008, Morgan 2009) are to be welcomed, but must be extended to irreligion as a means of addressing the longstanding irony that sees scholars represent materialism as an abstract doctrine and, hence, as immaterial. There do of course exist a myriad of atheist intellectual engagements with materialism – in India, our main focus in this essay, and elsewhere – but the majority of atheists are not materialist philosophers. Indeed, a large number of atheists might not know what “materialism” is (in doctrinal terms), and enact it only implicitly. Body donation – as a personal act – might be considered an intimate objectification of materialism that, dialectically, both evidences and forms it. But not only that. Body donation has come to form a key indicator of the morality of materialism, and as such has come to act as a key component of atheist ‘impression management’, in India and elsewhere.²

¹ For the immediate purposes of autopsy, medical training (i.e. anatomy instruction), and/or extraction of organs for transplantation.

² To avoid confusion, we note here that “materialism” and being “materialistic” is not the same thing. One still encounters the assumption that all atheists are rampantly materialistic, which is, of course, not necessarily the case.

Our principal examples derive from our fieldwork experiences among Indian rationalist, humanist, and atheist activists,³ but we also draw on historical accounts of sceptical communities in nineteenth and twentieth-century France and Britain. The differentiated nature of non-religion is often occluded in contemporary ‘hyper-intellectualised’ debates, as are its lived, practical dimensions (Engelke 2012) – a state of affairs particularly ironic so far as the Indian situation is concerned given atheists’ sustained focus there on practical action (see Quack 2012a; 2012b: 221-244). While ethnography is an apt tool to counter such occlusions and allows us instead to draw out ‘the experiential and embodied side of being non-religious’ (Engelke 2012), it might be suggested that the generalising nature of our title runs the risk of undermining such aims. However, this is precisely our point. In different times and places non-believers respond to different challenges and pursue different agendas, but atheist body donation – albeit for different immediate purposes – is something that is held in common across very many of these contexts and that, we think, is worth acknowledging.

Matter of Disbelief

The Indian atheist activists with whom we have spent time – as opposed to those often characterised dismissively by activists as metropolitan-based ‘talking shop’ humanists or ‘arm-chair atheists’ – do not simply ‘believe’ in materialism; they seek to debunk or ‘expose’ what they consider to be pernicious supernatural beliefs via skilled deployments of materials.⁴ Which is to say, the religious beliefs and practices they consider to be both wrong and harmful are not only challenged by them on the intellectual level but particularly through hands-on activism, performances and campaigns. For instance, the retooling of sacred objects for irreligious purposes forms a key part of their methodology at education programs conducted by atheist activists. They re-employ temple objects such as lamps, coconuts and candles in order to ‘expose’ the irrational and fraudulent functions these items are seen to serve in the sacral contexts from which they derive: ‘[Priests and spiritual gurus] use these things to cheat you, but we will use them to educate you’ (Quack 2012b: xi). One Indian rationalist leader who undertakes nationwide ‘miracle exposure’ programs, for instance, carries with him a ‘miracle bag’⁵ containing an array of chemicals, powders and apparatuses in order to demonstrate the ‘science behind miracles’.

³ Quack has conducted ethnographic research among Indian rationalist societies since 2007, and Copeman since 2009. Despite conducting our respective stretches of fieldwork independently, in order to avoid unnecessary distraction we do not differentiate between ourselves when presenting ethnography in this essay. We use the term ‘atheist activists’ in this essay for clarity, but the reticence with which activists use the term ‘atheism’, or *nastika*, in public must be noted (the difficulties connected to the use of the notion “atheism” in the Hindu context is discussed elsewhere: Quack 2012c and 2013). While usually happy privately to use such terms, their public usage is often discouraged as having the potential to prevent them getting a sympathetic or fair public hearing. As one leader told us, “Yes, we are atheists and rationalists, but if we say we are atheists we get into all kinds of trouble. So we don’t say it always.”

⁴ On the spectrum ranging from intellectuals or “a-theologians” to down-to-earth social activists see Quack (2012b: 208-211).

⁵ Called a “magic kit” amongst rationalists in Maharashtra (Quack 2012b: 116).

He begins his performances, usually before schoolchildren, teachers or both,⁶ by materialising 'from thin air' sacred ash (*vibhuti*), which he then distributes among amazed onlookers whilst stating, for instance, '*promotion milega*' ('You'll get a promotion'). *Vibhuti* is commonly materialised by Indian *chamatkari babas* (miracle men); notably, recently deceased south Indian guru Sathya Sai Baba famously described the materialisation of *vibhuti* as his 'calling card' (as a CNN journalist once put it, it is the guru's 'signature illusion' [Marshall 2004]) – given his popularity and the extraordinary fetishisation of the substance amongst his devotees (S. Srinivas 2008, T. Srinivas 2010), *vibhuti* has taken on the stature, for activists, of superstitious substance number-one, and so figures prominently in their programs.

Having distributed the substance and successfully seized everyone's attention, the activist states: 'But it is not a miracle. It is a trick', and he explains that the substance is in fact decompressed dried powder that, via a sleight of hand, he⁷ has produced from between his fingers explaining that nothing can be materialised out of the blue. If a devotee is in the audience, they may have, in a reflex action, ingested the substance, and so shout something like 'But it tastes and smells the same as Sai's!' To much laughter, the activist will then declare, 'Of course! I bought it from the same shop at Sathya Sai Baba. It is actually cow dung roasted with sandalwood'. To reinforce the point, and if the technology is available at the location, he might at this stage show slow motion video footage of the guru performing exactly the sleight of hand he has just performed himself. The effect can be powerful. (Instead of such performances some rationalist groups sell the respective VCDs and DVDs.) Another standard declaration, made by the activist at this stage in the program, is delivered in an incredulous tone: 'Engineers at IIT⁸ believe in Sathya Sai Baba's materialisation of *vibhuti*. We have [in India] twenty-first century technology but a medieval mentality. This is very dangerous'. This is the cue for a lesson in basic materialism: the Law of Nature that matter can be neither created nor destroyed, to which, distressingly, even the nation's leaders in science and technology fail to fully subscribe.

Moreover, scepticism and exposé are embodied in a variety of ways. Activists ask audience members to check their pulse – it isn't detectable, just like those yogis who claim they can stop their heartbeats. But the trick is simple and subsequently demonstrated. A small rubber ball, about the size of an eye, is pressed under the activist's armpit causing his pulse to become undetectable. Rationalists challenge many other such instances of claims by "godmen"⁹ to be able to control matter solely via mind-power, for instance offering large sums of money to anyone who is able to perform a miracle such as living without food and water over weeks under "scientific conditions". Yet, they also perform

⁶ "Catching them young" is considered to be vitally important. Teachers and students are thus particular targets of atheist activist campaigning.

⁷ It is usually a he. As with rationalist organisations globally, there is an unequal representation of the sexes in the Indian movement. Roughly, active women constitute less than a quarter of the groups' membership.

⁸ Prestigious technology and engineering colleges.

⁹ A generic term for various kinds of religious specialists (e.g. *bābā*, *mullā*, *sādhu*, *maulavī*, *phakīr*, *tantrik*, or *mantrik*) often used by the rationalists in a derogative manner.

themselves physically demanding “miracles” and thereby use their own bodies in the service of supernatural exposé, in a not dissimilar manner to the ascetics they challenge. Some activists have needles placed through their cheeks and hooks through muscles in their backs in order to demonstrate that it is quite possible to endure such bodily violations without the aid of any kind of supernatural power. Others bury their heads in holes in the earth, risking suffocation, or walk over burning coals. The atheist’s body is thus a key material and technique in what we might term their ‘culture of proving’.¹⁰ Indeed, if there is an ‘atheist body’, perhaps it is that which is placed in the service of proof making and exposé.¹¹

Much more could be said about the technologies of exposé employed by Indian atheist activists. Our purpose in providing a sense of them here is simply to show that the matter of belief is combated (‘exposed’) via the matter of disbelief. Such a recognition is a necessary starting point for providing insights into the material culture of materialism. Yet the irony remains that materialism is more often than not de-materialised in its typical characterisation, scholarly and otherwise, as an abstract tenet of atheist dogma. Amongst those with whom we worked, materialism is not just a belief but something that is worked out – made manifest, reconfirmed, we would go so far as to say *constituted* – via specific material practices. Morgan (2009: 12) and others argue that ‘materiality *mediates* belief, that material objects and practices both enable it and enact it’. We would not object but simply expand the point to include disbelief or unbelief, which is after all a negatively defined form of belief (in the non-supernatural, the definitiveness of the Laws of Nature, and so on). It is not a coincidence that the atheist activist’s materialism is formulated and demonstrated via an array of materials and material practices. For instance, the activist’s ‘miracles bag’ contains materials whose purpose, via techniques of performative demonstration, is to reclaim materials for materialism – not only compressed roasted cow dung and sandalwood powder, but also potassium permanganate and glycerine (for the ‘spontaneous’ lighting of fires), camphor (for burning on the hands and in the mouth with no pain – after all, heat rises), tablets of aspartame (for transferring ‘divine sweetness’ to audience members’ hands) to name but a few of the chemicals and substances contained therein.

The material culture of atheism is not a wholly novel object of scholarly analysis. One thinks, for instance, of the ‘atheist objects’ that populated ‘anti-religion museums’ in the former Soviet Union (Paine 2009). In such museums, icons and relics were subjected to a ‘deliberate policy of sacrilege’ and employed so as to ‘expose the tricks and the crimes of the clergy’. Further objects of exposé, strikingly similar to those used by atheists in India, can be found in books like *The discoverie of witchcraft* (1584), written by the English ‘country gentleman’ Reginald Scot (1538–1599) to counter belief in witches. However, the situation is not entirely satisfactory, in part due to problems generated, mentioned earlier, by recent publicly circulated ‘hyper-intellectualised version[s] of what it means to do without Him’ (Engelke 2012). It remains necessary, therefore, to

¹⁰ We draw this term from Livingstone’s (1999) work on communities of mathematicians.

¹¹ This observation may be considered a slightly oblique response to Hirschkind’s (2011) recent question, ‘Is there an secular body?’

underscore the point that the recent foregrounding of the 'matter of belief' as an indispensable object of study (Engelke 2005, Keane 2008, Morgan 2009) needs to be extended to the study of disbelieving and sceptical communities for exactly the same reasons it was necessary in the former case: as a corrective to prior analyses that reduced religious (or non-religious) lives to 'a state of mind' and discounted those 'material manifestations' that were necessary for the establishment of these systems' social existence in making them 'available to, interpretable by, and, in most cases, replicable by other people: bodily actions, speech, the treatment of objects, and so forth' (Keane 2008: 114).

We suggest that the atheist's dead body may be considered an exemplary instance of the matter of disbelief and a key atheist material artefact. If *vibhuti* is considered a 'useless' materialization and religious offerings are seen as a waste of resources, the dead body that is not offered or donated, from a rationalist point of view, is similarly 'useless' and a waste of resources – but the second scenario embodies a double tragedy, since the cadaver could so easily, if it were donated, epitomise a righteous utility: unlike the “useless” materializations of ash or rings rationalists criticize so acerbically, which moreover mystify and exploit those who witness them, matter of disbelief is pressed into the service of progress and demystification. And, of course, in the province of death and dying, the “usefully” donated body serves, contrastively, to reveal the undonated cadaver as a site of illusion and destruction. It is to further exploration of these matters that we now turn. We draw on interviews and writings that disclose what Indian rationalists consider an ideal-typical approach towards issues of dying and death. While these statements represent the common practices of all members of the rationalist movement only to a limited degree, they illustrate the “official” perspective and its ideology as outlined by representatives of the larger movement.

Creative refusal

It hardly needs saying that life cycle rituals, especially those concerning death, figure prominently in everyday life in India. The official Indian rationalist worldview rejects all religious beliefs and practices connected with such rituals, those associated with death included. For instance, rituals that concern a soul, rebirth or any other conceptions of afterlife or non-material life-substances including Hindu rituals such as *antyeṣṭi* (last sacrifice) or *śrāddha* (ancestral rites) are all rejected. The rituals that follow the death of a person help to deal with one of the most polluting and inauspicious occurrences in classical Hinduism. The family of the deceased is separated from normal social life until they are re-integrated through the performance of the respective rituals. Usually families are also concerned with the heightened danger of being attacked by malevolent spirits until *śrāddha* are performed. They also allow the spirit of the deceased to travel its own way (see Flood 1998: 207). Only after the 'soul' of the deceased has reached the realm of the *pitr-loka* (ancestors) is the threat banished of her or his coming back as a ghost to haunt the living. Such conceptions, for atheist activists, underscore the status of the domain of death and dying as one of concentrated superstition. In tackling superstitions here the

understanding is that they are tackling them where they are most strongly rooted in society.

The booklet *Humanity at the Time of Death* (*Mrutyu Tane Manavta*), published by the Rationalist Association of Gujarat, *Satyasodhak Sabha* (Desai 1996), features standard rationalist criticism of death rituals: it excoriates their illogicality, their furtherance of Brahminism and the financial burden they place upon families. Both irrational and harmful, they are to be rejected on epistemological as well as moral grounds:

Satya Sodhek Sabha has strongly stated that the soul or spirit does not go anywhere after death - no event takes place after death. After the death, relatives gather for a meal on the 12th-13th day, on the first death anniversary, they feed Brahmins on every death anniversary, and conduct *shraddha* rites (a ceremony performed in honour of a dead ancestor). But all these rituals and beliefs are unscientific, unnecessary and create useless financial burden. This should be stopped immediately and boldly.

Such aversion to furnishing the pockets of ritual specialists via death rituals is by no means a uniquely Indian phenomenon. French freethinkers, such as Ecole d'anthropologie teacher, Andre Lefevre, willed not only all his useful body parts to the School of Anthropology of Paris but added the stipulation that all matters of death should be taken care of "without the interference of any priest or any church" (Hecht 1997: 714). Eugene Veron reveals a more specifically anti-clerical expression of this attitude: "I do not want," he explained, "after my death, to contribute, even a little, to the accumulation of the wealth of the clergy, against which I have combated all my life and which never ceases to do to France and to the Republic all the evil in its power" (ibid: 715-716).

Rationalist societies not only denounce and reject religious rituals but also promote alternatives; which is to say, they engage in a 'creative refusal' (Graeber 2012). This is an important point. Those activists who engage in debunking miracles and exposing fraudulent gurus are generally believed, within the movement, to be performing an important service; but at the same time there is some discomfort with the 'negative' agenda such campaigns seem to embody. Such activities instantiate what eminent twentieth-century Indian atheist activist and leader Gora termed 'negative atheism', which he defined in opposition to his own concept of 'positive atheism' (Gora 1978)¹². His son Dr Vijayam, who heads the Atheist Centre in Andhra Pradesh,¹³ explained to us that 'Negative atheism is where you are always finding fault with others. It is a historical necessity. But though a doctor will give you an electrical shock, that's not the therapy. Exposing superstitions is not the end in itself. It is an entry point. We must expose superstitions, but we must also emphasise an alternative way of life'. Dr Vijayam thus follows his father, Gora, in emphasising the requirement for a 'positive atheism' that moves beyond the criticism of religion in proposing 'human-centred' alternatives to the practices it would replace.

¹² As distinct from Antony Flew's distinction between "negative" and "positive" atheism (Flew 1976).

¹³ Further details on which may be found in Quack (2012a, 2012b: 89-91).

Echoing this, the aforementioned Gujarat rationalist association, under the heading 'Adopt best last ritual', proposes the following alternatives:

Deceased person's unfinished work or ideas can be taken forward, give donations to the organisations working for the welfare of poor and needy. Tree plantations can be carried out in the memory of the dead. Support various voluntary organisations in their work.

One Maharashtrian rationalist told us that one of the most important tasks of the atheist activist is to engage in 'rational substitution' in respect of the practices they combat. To employ his term, then, we suggest that the atheist's gift of his/her dead body is a rational substitution of particular ideological and practical significance. This is so because it appears to productively *bridge positive and negative atheism*. It is no doubt a 'negative' rejection of prior forms, with the cadaver, like roasted cow dung and sandalwood powder in the hands of the atheist activist, retooled as an object of exposé/matter of disbelief that contrastively casts the undonated cadaver as an embodiment of destruction and hopeless mystification. Yet it also asserts a positive atheism that contributes a 'human-centred' alternative to the practice it would replace. In fact the contrast could not be more plain, for in a reversal of the idea that the un-pacified dead may cause difficulties for the living, Dr Vijayam states that atheists, 'in recognition of the fact that there's no life after death pledge for organ, eye and body donation' and devise ceremonies which 'try to improve the quality of life here on earth'.¹⁴ That is to say, the dead may, via body donation, not disrupt but *assist* the living.¹⁵

Such an offering instantiates what might be termed 'gift switching'. As was mentioned above, the Satya Sodhek Sabha rejects the feeding of Brahmins associated with mourning ceremonies. The present-day Indian rationalist movement had its origins in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century reformist opposition to caste inequities and Brahminical hegemony, and contemporary Indian rationalism is similarly invested in undoing the ritual authority traditionally embodied in the Brahmin priest; indeed, caste is defined as profoundly superstitious – as *the* paramount superstition – by atheist activists.¹⁶ Not only is the mortuary gift of food or money to a Brahmin non-

¹⁴ www.iheu.org/atheist-ceremonies.

¹⁵ Yet in other historical and cultural contexts cremation has been perceived to assist the living – certainly more so than (Christian) burial practices. For instance, in his book *Der Kreislauf des Lebens* (*The Circle of Life*, published 1852 in Mainz) the freethinker and physiologist Jakob Moleschott advocated cremation as a more rational and hygienic funeral practice, pleading that the remains of human bodies should be used to fertilize fields and ought not to be wasted in tombs and graves (1852: 422). The underlying logic of Moleschott's proposal and that of atheist advocates of body donation is the same: the point is not necessarily to defend a certain practice but to consider what is most "rational" in the circumstances and to avoid a waste of resources (while also attacking religious beliefs along the way). While it was cremation that allowed this in mid nineteenth-century Europe, it is body donation today.

¹⁶ E.g. the name of the organisation *Satyasodhak Sabha* explicitly refers to the 'truth seeking' (*satyasodhak*) ceremonies initiated by anti-untouchability campaigner Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) in place of caste-entrenching religious rituals. See Quack (2012b: 64-7).

productive in Indian rationalist terms, it perpetuates the country's biggest evil – dominance of the 'priestly class'. In rationalist hands the mortuary gift persists, of course, but only insofar as it is turned on its head. Thus, when the body of former Marxist Chief Minister of West Bengal Jyoti Basu was donated upon his death in January 2010, anti-caste rationalist campaigners lavished praise upon him. As one obituary put it:

Claiming to die for the masses, we have seen our political class like to be cremated among weeping people and amidst the chant of Vaidik Mantras by aristocratic Brahmins...The cremation of a political leader is again an opportunity for greedy priestly class to pontificate us on greatness of religious virtues for the purpose of spreading their virus... The racist brahmanical philosophy has preached us that donating your eyes and body is dangerous.¹⁷ Jyoti Basu has saved us from priestly pontification... In the villages, people offer their income to Brahmins in hope the dead person would get it. If we have to make the brahmanical priestly class redundant, we must follow what Jyoti Babu did, by donating our bodies and shunning the rituals, we are so fond of, in the name of our culture. One hope, our political class will learn a lesson from this that life is meant to serve the people and it ends here, there is no point in getting yourself purified by the priestly class which has cheated the people for centuries in the name death and birth.¹⁸

In eliminating the mediation of the grasping Brahmin priest, then, the rationally redefined mortuary gift perpetrates an attack on the caste system itself. It should be noted that this is hardly the first attempt to bypass the mediations of Brahmin priests – reformist anti-Brahmin movements have sought means for doing so for centuries.¹⁹ What is new here is the method.

Moral materialism, positive atheism

As we noted above, body donation serves various purposes for Indian atheists. Let us frame this briefly in terms of the kind of practical and ideological *value* it holds for Indian atheist activists. For Miller (2008), value is to be found via processes of commensuration. In contrast to what he calls 'bottom-line' (or foundational) understandings that seek to locate its origins in definite sources (most famously, of course, in labour [Marx 1970]), value, for Miller, is to be found where competing factors are brought to a complex resolution (2008: 1129). As we have suggested, the atheist's dead body embodies a similar bridging function. Part of its value for Indian atheists lies in the way it embodies a combination of 'negative' rejection (of unscientific and destructive death rituals) and 'positive' atheist agenda-setting (in a dazzling reversal that retains the form of a mortuary offering, the gift is now one that assists the living and marks a contribution to 'science'). In this way the atheist's dead body bridges a tension within Indian

¹⁷ This is a reference to the idea that any organ taken from a person will be missing in their next birth; for example, an eye donor will be reborn without eyes or else blind

¹⁸ <http://www.countercurrents.org/rawat180110.htm>

¹⁹ Examples are provided in Copeman and Reddy (2012).

atheist activism. It is a practice to which both those primarily concerned to expose superstition and those primarily concerned to delineate constructive alternatives are happy to subscribe.

Vital here is what we have been calling the materiality of atheist materialism. As is often remarked, atheists are wont to express their identity “negatively” in opposition to religious beliefs and practices. As was seen above with reference to *vibhuti*, staunch atheists may well make fun of religious practices and “the matter of [their] belief.” Indeed, much of their material culture is structured in such a way. One thinks, for instance, of the atheist parody of the ichthys symbol, which features a fish with emerging feet and the text ‘Darwin’ and of t-shirts such as the one featuring the word ‘Fiction’ spelt out using religious symbols. The material culture of comedic debunking is a particular feature of Indian miracle exposé campaigns. The south India guru Mata Amritanandamayi, who famously hugs her devotees in what are usually tearful encounters, makes grown men faint not because of her *shakti* but because she presses them to her ‘big jugs’; an Indian rationalist film depicts a swami in a rocket going round the earth to show what would happen if swamis could really levitate (their weight would need to be less than the weight of the gravitational force of the earth); in imitation of one famous guru’s ‘signature illusion’ a schoolgirl, having rubbed together in her hands a tablet of aspartame, causes the skin of those she touches to become ‘miraculously’ sweet. Amidst much laughter, her fellow schoolchildren are made to touch her feet and chant ‘*Oh Mata Ji Apki shakti!*’ Thus is a substance of mystification retooled as matter of disbelief. Integrated into the canon of ‘atheist substances’ via the comedic practices of atheist materiality, another material is reclaimed for materialism. Yet, the material culture of mockery exacerbates the tension, to which we earlier referred, that exists between negative and positive projections of disbelief in providing a striking instance of the former. The atheist’s dead body and organ donation, on the other hand, provides a compellingly different material culture element – one that is “positive”, and lacking the mockery evinced in the examples just given. In each case materials are reclaimed for materialism, but the atheist promotion of body donation suggests a more austere atheist materiality that goes beyond the comedic. In several respects, then, this is a material culture to be taken seriously.

Body donation also plays a ‘positive’ role in respect of what might be called atheist impression management; i.e. the atheist’s body donation acts to counter the claims of the god fearing to moral superiority. Indeed, the accusation that atheists are lacking in compassion and moral sense is prevalent in India, as it is elsewhere.²⁰ For instance, Hindu right organisation, Hindu Jagruti, cites the *Upanishads*²¹ in support of its assertion that ‘a righteous code of conduct’ is dependent on fearing God, while also claiming that ‘Ego’ is ‘Low’ among ‘Seekers’

²⁰ A particularly shrill instance is to be found in Pasquini’s *Atheist Personality Disorder* (2009): ‘What little atheists do for the needy is virtually always done for self-aggrandizement [and] self-promotion... Put my name on it and I’ll donate! ... Atheists give less to charity than any group in the world’ (ibid: 61).

²¹ Hindu sacred treatises (c. 800–200 BC) expounding the *Vedas* in primarily non-dualist, mystical terms.

and 'High' among 'Rationalists'.²² Sensitivity to this kind of criticism is acute among Indian atheist activists, and the publication in 2009 of Greg Epstein's *Good Without God*, which as its title suggests confronts such accusations head on, was greeted enthusiastically and with much discussion at pan-Indian rationalist conferences (much more so than, for instance, Dawkins' *The God Delusion* [2006]).

The very first sentence of the aforementioned Gujarati booklet, *Satyasodhak Sabha* (Desai 1996), emphasises the moral dimension of rationalists' position towards death and dying: "We want to inform the Gujarat community that a rationalist attitude will not only make life meaningful and enjoyable but also helpful to others even after death." For one prominent south Indian rationalist we spoke with, "the most human way" to deal with the death of his mother was to arrange for the transplantation of her organs: "I went from hospital to hospital with the liver of my mother. That was my passion and what I had to do. I see this as a tribute to the principle of life." For this atheist activist, as for many others, "the donation of one's body is a moral thing to do. In fact, I consider it to be the most moral thing you can do." Such donations thus reverse the typical argument concerning atheist egoism: they show that atheists can be moral (donate their bodies for other humans), while religion is egoistic (not only does the compulsion to cremate or bury the body foreclose the possibility of its humane donation, mortuary gifts to the deceased are self-serving insofar as a primary aim is to avoid the unwanted attentions of the non-pacified departed). Moreover, it is atheist materiality that performs this reversal. The atheist's donated body provides a kind of 'material report' (Ssorin-Chaikov & Sosnina 2004) or objectification (Miller 2010) of the atheist's godless morality. Moral materialism is thereby achieved and evidenced.²³ One may indeed be 'good without god'.

Avoidance of ritual and setting an example

We have thus far sought to show how body donation contributes to the fulfilment of a number of prevalent 'atheist objectives': not only has it developed into a key feature of atheist impression management, it successfully bridges different poles of the movement, while circumventing the pecuniary grip of the Indian atheist's traditional foe, the Brahmin priest. We consider now in greater detail the issue of circumvention – for at a very basic level body donation is compelling attractive to atheists because it appears to guarantee the bypass of the conventional mortuary rituals they find so redundant. In our interviews with activists, though they tended to be spoken of in the same breath, evading the ritual impulse was frequently posited *ahead* of medical science as a reason to donate. For Pune-based Suman Oak, 'there are two good reasons to donate: 1. It is useful for medics, and 2. You can avoid useless ceremonies'. Ghaziabad-based

²² www.hindujagruti.org/hindusim/knowledge/article/why-is-it-important-to-understand-implied-meaning-in-spirituality.html#9

²³ The suggestive term 'moral materialism' is drawn from Alter's recent book (2011) in which it is used quite differently.

lawyer and secretary of the India Renaissance Society²⁴, N. Pancholi, stated to us: 'We donate to avoid ritual, but also to promote medical research'.

But, of course, things do not always proceed smoothly for, as Hecht (2003: 11) puts it, even 'the best laid plans are difficult to carry out after one's demise' – as in the famous case of Indira Gandhi ignoring the unambiguous request in the will of her father Nehru that that no religious ceremonies be performed after his death (Zachariah 2004: 257). As Suman Oak explained to us, 'While alive [rationalists] make an affidavit to donate, but their family members sometimes do not respect this. The family think *atma* will linger if ceremonies are not completed. Only after cremation will it be free, or take rebirth. If the funeral does not happen, then the *atma* will become a ghost, roaming about; and all ghosts punish the people who don't do ceremonies for them'. It is rare that all one's close family members will be fellow atheists, and acute tensions can and do result. Having pledged his/her body, the matter of the future facilitation of one's gift may well cause the would-be donor some anxiety. The concern is that they will be dragged into rituals at a point where they have no control. This is reflected in advice offered to the would-be body donor in the aforementioned *Mrutyu Tane Manavta* publication (Desai ed. 1996):

If possible, prepare the person mentally to whom the authority is given [to enact the post-mortem donation], and whatever their personal belief is, make sure that they will act according to the authority given to them. (Satya Sodhek Sabha has had a number of experiences wherein the dead person has informed their close relatives, or stated in writing, their intention to donate their eyes or body, but wherein the relatives, after the person's death, because of their emotions, do not act accordingly). Identify the right person to avoid this.

The problem of familial disobedience is by no means unique to the Indian case. For example, in late nineteenth-century France members of the atheist Society for Mutual Autopsy faced similar difficulties. Members willed their brains to one another for dissections that, they believed, would conclusively disprove the existence of the soul while providing valuable phrenological insights (Hecht 2003). Hecht provides examples in which the problem of relatives' reluctance to enact such donations was met head on: should family members contest this aspect of the donor's will they were to be disinherited (ibid: 21).

Atheist leader Narendra Nayak also took a staunch approach to his family member's desire to perform death rituals for his mother. He narrated his experience to us:

My mother died in 1995 from cancer. It was not unexpected. By the time she died she also had become an atheist. Hers and my beliefs grew together. She told me, 'well I know you are not going to perform any ceremonies to send my soul to heaven, but don't donate my body to the

²⁴ Organisation propounding 'scientific humanism', founded by M. N. Roy in 1946. See Quack (2012b: 83-5) on M. N. Roy.

medical college, please just cremate me'. I went ahead and cremated. My family tried to force me to do all the rituals for sending soul to heaven, but I resisted. In our ancestral home, near Mangalore, my relatives said there are lots of problems. This was three years after my mother's death. So they summoned some astrologers to do a big expensive ceremony during which they said because the ghost of my mother has not been sent to heaven her soul is coming here and causing problems. They asked me to do the ceremonies so she would go to heaven, I said no. Instead they did the next best thing... they did some ceremonies to make her spirit go to other houses, not our ancestral house. So my mother is still roaming around, though she can't go to our ancestral home because of the protective rituals. So that's the sorry fate of the mother of a rationalist!

The events recounted by Nayak, though they concern a refusal to perform rituals rather than body donation, are nevertheless emblematic of the family tensions that an unbending atheist attitude towards death and dying frequently generates. Not all atheist activists are as uncompromising as Nayak.²⁵ However, in resisting his family's admonitions on multiple occasions, Nayak presents an exemplary narrative of the unwavering rationalist. He sets an example for others to follow. Indeed, the events described above are also recounted in his book *Battle Against Supernatural* (Nayak 2007) and in numerous sceptic newsletters for the edification of readers. We now consider the matter of atheist exemplarship in greater detail.

As was noted above, Indian atheists view death and dying as a particularly high-density locus of superstition. The idea is therefore compelling among them that to persuade a person to pledge their body is to persuade them to accede to much more besides – the act coming to stand for a kind of richly symbolic 'renunciation of superstition'. Thus has body donation (and to some extent allied bodily donations such as those of blood and organs) come to be defined as an iconic rationalist practice and pressed into service as an instrument of pedagogy. Body donation is thus afforded a similar status to that of the dissection of cadavers in the early colonial era as metonymic of a much wider liberation from superstition.²⁶ The exemplary atheist death is thus mobilised as an instrument of atheist activists' 'evangelical atheism' (Hecht 2003: 41). If miracles are good public relations for an aspiring religion (Strmiska 2000: 113), the good atheist death is similarly important for bringing the tenets of rationalist activism to the attention of a wider public. Since, as we have mentioned, activists try to spread their worldview via challenging superstition and religion where they perceive it to be most strongly rooted (i.e. in the domain of death and dying) it is necessary for rationalists to make their donation public; all the 'propaganda' is lost if they donate privately. As Nash (1995: 159) puts it in reference to nineteenth-century

²⁵ See Quack (2012b: 240).

²⁶ Local negative attitudes towards dissection were viewed by colonial commentators as evidence of the superstition from which colonial rule would liberate them. Anatomy was considered not only practically 'necessary', but 'exemplary' (Arnold 1993: 5). Heavily freighted with taboo and stigma, the project of fostering a cluster of eager trainee dissectors was representative of the wider civilizing mission invoked by the British as justifying their presence in the subcontinent.

British freethinkers who were similarly concerned to avoid typical death rituals, death thus becomes a key 'ideological event' with explicit instructional value – a situation in which activists have to 'lie down and be counted' (McManners 1981: 107). If the Indian tradition of 'lives as lessons' offers up exemplary life narratives for purposes of emulation (Arnold and Blackburn 2004: 8, 20), atheist activists are in the process of setting up a connected tradition yet one that is thoroughly their own – atheist *deaths* as lessons. Similar to the role of last words in the western literary *ars moriendi* tradition, the good atheist death functions didactically 'as a lingering exhortation' to those left behind (Faust 2008: 10-11).

Thus the deaths of noted atheist activists, via the pledging of their bodies and the enactments of these pledges, come to be held up as exemplary. A recent issue of the Maharashtra-based rationalist newsletter *Thought and Action*, for instance, which recounts the contribution of pivotal twentieth-century rationalist Abraham Kovoov,²⁷ who died in 1978, states: "I am not afraid of death and life after death", he wrote in his will. "*To set an example*, I don't want a burial." He donated his eyes to an eye bank and his corpse to a medical college for anatomical study, with instructions that his skeleton eventually be given to the science laboratory of Thurston College. All of these wishes were honoured' (Rationalist 2008: 18; our emphasis). Noted rationalist Premanand, a figure of comparable stature to Kovoov in twentieth and twenty-first century Indian atheist activism, became extremely concerned after being diagnosed with cancer and in anticipation of his death to do all that was needed to facilitate the successful donation of his body – including relocating to a place where the necessary amenities would be available. In an interview first published in March 2009, seven months before his death, he declared his intention to move from the small town in Tamil Nadu where he resided, 'where it might be difficult to do what I want to be done with my body', to the metropolitan centre of Bangalore, 'where the facilities are better... I want all the parts of my body to be donated to others so that they can be put to use. I don't want to be buried or cremated. I would like my remains to be used for study or research' (Premanand 2009: 22). Re-published in a special issue of the journal *Bangalore Skeptic* upon his death, the interview evinces his exemplary dedication. The lessons elaborated in his life are reaffirmed in his dying commitment to the donation of his body; his death is rendered instructional. Such ideal-typical cases as these receive a degree of media attention and thus connect with a public beyond signed-up fellow rationalists while, at the same time, placing pressure on the common member to follow the lead of the righteous ones.

The most high profile recent atheist death was that of Jyoti Basu, mentioned earlier, the former Marxist Chief Minister (state-level head of government) of West Bengal (1977-2000) who died on 17 January 2010, aged 95, and whose death became the stimulus for a major media campaign to boost body donation.²⁸ Indeed, the Bengal media took on a role similar to that which it had assumed upon the death of religious leader Balak Brahmachari in 1993 when, faced with a mass of devotees refusing to accept that he had died (they insisted instead that

²⁷ On Kovoov, see Quack (2012b: 96-7).

²⁸ Having discussed the circumstances of this death in detail elsewhere (Copeman & Reddy 2012) we will not discuss it further here.

he had gone into a state of *nirvikalpa samadhi*, a reversible coma-like state achievable only by those possessed of the utmost spiritual prowess), it had turned the death into a 'fight for rational values in public life and against obscurantist beliefs and practices' (Chatterjee 1999: 111), though it should be noted that the extent to which the media can be termed rationalist 'fellow travellers' is extremely limited, and the relationship between atheist activists and media agencies is in many respects a difficult one. In certain cases, however, collaborations are possible, and in making visible Basu's death as an ideological event, the episode was something of a rationalist publicity coup. We discuss elsewhere the idea that the atheist's dead body, as one activist put it, 'should carry his message'.²⁹ Indeed, using their donated dead bodies to communicate their message mobilises the materiality of atheist materialism evangelically as a strategy of persuasion that operates by means other than argument.³⁰

This brings us back to the question of evidence, briefly discussed earlier. Mumbai-based secular leader V. K. Sinha stated to us that the three major transformations in life - birth, marriage and death - are critical "tests for atheism," while Narendra Nayak quoted Albert Camus' observation that "society judges a man by what he does when his mother dies" in reference to his own actions on the deaths of his parents. Death is seen here as the decisive test for atheism in several key respects: first, because of the assumption that many people facing the end of their lives are prone to turn to religion; second, because religious beliefs and practices related to death are rooted so strongly in the culture and everyday life in India; and third, because of the fact that the way in which the body is treated is seen as confirmation and verification of the true position one held. The fate of the atheist's dead body is thus invested with significance as key to defending and/or "proving" the enduring constancy of their worldview. By producing valuations of lives lived in this way, and despite him or her now being dead, the fate of the atheist's body forms an intensely biographical moment. Rather than a passive object amidst the 'fuss' of 'religious rites or prayers'³¹ the body now becomes both a material signifier and enactment of materialism. The body is thus, in several senses, an object of evidence: it evidences the truth of materialism itself as well as the donor's ethical consistency. There is thus a double moral aspect to the death of the atheist activist: we have seen how, as a 'helpful action', body donation allows the atheist to enact a 'moral materialism'. Yet these are also times of moral peril: for if one fails to make arrangements for a good atheist death, or even recants, one's atheism in one's dying moments, the ethical consistency of a whole life may be called into question.

There is a hoary tradition of accusation and counter-accusation in this respect. As David Hume neared his death, 'It is said that the rabble of Edinburgh congregated around his house demanding to know when the atheist would recant' (Hacking 1986: 238). In nineteenth-century France, the importance of a good materialist death was recognised as a means of countering priests' taunts

²⁹ See Quack (2012b: 236).

³⁰ On using bodies to communicate, see Strathern (2010: 148).

³¹ These are the words of N. I. Chacko, a member of the Indian Rationalist Association, who died on December 11, 1978. See Quack (2012b: 242) for full account.

concerning atheist deathbed conversions (Hecht 2003: 31); and similarly in England, a 'staple tactic used by the Christian apologists to discomfort the infidel was to discredit the deathbed of the movement's own past heroes. Much ink and paper was spent in describing the deathbed of Thomas Paine who was supposed to have recanted and spent his last days in torment consuming improbable quantities of brandy and instructing those around him to burn copies of *The Age of Reason*' (Nash 1995: 164). It is thus not difficult to understand why a notion of "the 'good [atheist death]' was popularized as a supreme test of belief.... That persistent attempts were still made to undermine these 'good deaths' was itself instrumental in making them of still further importance. This in part explains the longevity of the classic set-piece, stage-managed secularist death" (ibid: 167). Let us detail, then, a contemporary Indian variant of the stage-managed atheist death.

When the founder of FIRA rationalist leader B. Premanand was dying from cancer early in October 2009 at the age of 79 his close colleague Narendra Nayak sought to secure his message by taking his signature and fingerprint on a 'declaration of attitude and temperament'. The editor of the journal *Bangalore Skeptic* then sent an email message to a rationalist list that was also posted online detailing Premanand's deteriorating health and asserting that while 'his vital organs have been affected', his 'brain and his ideology remain intact, and we wanted the world to know about it and to make a declaration on his behalf that it remains so'. This was important because there was apparently a rumour that, on his deathbed, this noted atheist had 'started believing in god and supernatural powers'. A scanned copy of Premanand's declaration was attached to the message. The declaration stated:

It is common for the purveyors of superstitions and such anti rational forces to start spreading rumours about rationalists turning to god and other supernatural forces at the end of their lives and becoming devotees of gods and god men of various types. It is also claimed that at times of crises that we staunch rationalists turn to spiritualism and religion. I wish to clarify that as on today the twentieth of September 2009 I remain a staunch rationalist and wish to place on record the following: A. I continue to be a rationalist of full conviction. B. I do not believe in any supernatural power. All the powers that we encounter are in the realm of nature and nothing exists beyond that. C. I do not believe in the existence of the soul or rebirth. D. I have not turned to any religion, god or any sort of spiritual pursuits. E. When I pass away I shall be leaving only my body which is to be donated to a medical college and no spirit or soul to cause problems for the living.

The critical reassertion of a commitment to body donation in Premanand's rejoinder to the rumour that he had recanted seems to point again emphatically to the status of body donation as a special indicator of self-consistency and steadfastness. Premanand's atheism transparently endures and the lesson elaborated in his life is reaffirmed in his dying commitment to the donation of his body. Yet, in spite of the best efforts of Premanand's atheist colleagues and friends, rumours were spread after his death on the internet that cast aspersions

on the state of his atheism at the end. A particularly vehement critic of Sathya Sai Baba during his life, and author of the voluminous *Murders in Sai Baba's Bedroom* (2001), it was perhaps unsurprising that a website which exists in order “expos[e] critics’ smear campaigns against Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba” was the main source of these rumours.³²

Yet there is a twist, and something that makes this episode somewhat different from those reported from nineteenth-century England and France. Tsing (2000: 352) notes that “the cultural processes of all ‘place’ making and all ‘force’ making are *both local and global*, that is, both socially and culturally particular and productive of widely spreading interactions.” Premanand, of course, responded to and sought to debunk “local” superstitions, miracles and gurus – he targeted, in particular, Sathya Sai Baba, some of whose devotees in turn sought to debunk the debunker – not unlike those nineteenth-century priests, reviled and feared by atheists, ‘for the taunting public spectacle they made of any well-known atheist’s deathbed conversion’ (Hecht 2003: 31). Hence, the attempt, via putting to Premanand a “declaration of attitude and temperament”, to nullify the expected attempt to render his dying dispositions suspect. Global connectivity may be nothing new (Bayly 2003), but internet-facilitated connections enable a new instantaneity, and so caused the declaration – published on pan-Indian rationalist website *nirmukta.com*³³ - to achieve a near immediate global audience. Hence, just a few days afterwards a US-based atheist living in Kentucky was able to take inspiration from Premanand’s declaration in a blog titled “Ensuring a Rational Death:” “As an out, loud and proud atheist with freakazoid relatives, one of my great fears is that my godbot family members will try to turn my eventual death into a last-second conversion victory for their invisible sky wizard. So I think I will borrow from Basava Premanand’s rationalist living will.”³⁴ Then follows the declaration, and the comment: “I wish I’d known the man. He’s leaving us one small story from what must have been a life of reason, and is dying as a free man, free in thought.” If the declaration itself borrowed from the kinds of deathbed testaments innovated in nineteenth-century France and Britain (Nash 1995, Hecht 2003), it quickly travelled back to Euro-America, inspiring atheists there, too.

Recent studies of digital media have drawn attention to its evangelical potential and protagonists’ visions of a globally connected religiosity (Oosterbaan 2011, Miller & Horst 2012). Atheist activist communities are both local and global – engaging critically in their own local ‘combat’ situations, they gain inspiration from and share experiences with other globally dispersed atheist web users. To reiterate: connections across boundaries are hardly novel phenomena; yet, new articulations of ‘godlessness’, combining and recombining online, are facilitated and made visible in myriad web fora. Just as consideration of the matter of belief should not preclude the matter of disbelief, neither should the new and significant attention paid to religion and media (Meyer 2011) preclude recognition of non-religion and media. But that is another essay.

³² <http://www.saisathyasai.com/baba/Ex-Baba.com/Premanand/b-premanand-deception.html>

³³ <http://nirmukta.com/2009/09/22/premanand-in-abhirami-hospital-coimbatore>

³⁴ blueinthegrass.blogspot.com/2009/10/ensuring-rational-death.html

Conclusion

While for some, reading the “Book of Nature” is a way of studying God's revelation to mankind, for others, the natural sciences are a thoroughly secular undertaking. We thus have no wish to present atheism as a monolith, nor do we desire to dichotomise the varieties of religious and non-religious positions. There are conservative and progressive religious and non-religious approaches within biomedical ethics, and atheists as well as theists may have many reasons for donating their body (or for refraining to do so). It is interesting to note that several hundred years ago in England, public anatomy teaching was considered by some to reveal the work of the Creator and thus to offer an argument *against* atheism (Bates 2008: 3). Of course, body donation is not the same thing as anatomy instruction, though the former of course exists to facilitate the latter (in present times also potentially offering up a supply of transplantable organs). In spite of such differing perspectives, we argued in this essay that body donation can be described as an instance of atheist material culture *par excellence*. The philosopher and atheist Jeremy Bentham, who famously had his dead body preserved for display at University College, London, understood the donation of his body as a means of helping to combat mischievous superstitions concerning the corpse (Collings 2000). Rather than reveal the work of the Creator, Bentham hoped that public lectures performed over his body would provide a forceful demonstration “that the primitive horror at dissection originates in ignorance” (Marmoy 1958: 80).

The case of Bentham and the other examples discussed in this essay – principally from India, but also France and England – show the remarkable extent to which the atheist's dead body, donated for autopsy, instructional and/or transplantation purposes, recurs across time and space. The atheist's dead body, indeed, is “the atheist gift.” Its many recipients include “knowledge” and “progress”; that is to say, it is a gift given to an “anticipated future...envisioned as the outcome of an immanent process of development” (Langlitz 2006: 245) to which such an act contributes and thereby helps eventuate. To put it in terms of minimal abstraction, it is a gift to the living (to those who will benefit from it). In maximally abstract terms, the practice is itself a gift to atheism in enabling atheists – in theory – a ‘get out’ in respect of the rituals they abhor, while at the same time gifting them the gift that makes their materialism ‘moral’. It is, moreover, a gift of morale to remaining atheists in confirming the deceased's materialist constancy and thereby helping to nullify in advance rumours of recantation.

Remarkable though the spatio-temporal recurrence of “the atheist gift” is, the Indian variant possesses critically unique features that need to be acknowledged. Hecht's (2003) study of the Mutual Autopsy Society frames nineteenth-century French atheism in essentially negative terms: here atheism amounts to a lack that the Society and its body donations helped to ameliorate. Suffering the “emotional distress of living without god” and “bereft” without prayers and processions (ibid: 40), atheists were both given something to believe in (scientific materialism) and allowed to “live on” via membership of the Society

and the donation of their bodies. In the Indian case, however, body donation commensurates 'negative' rejection (of unscientific and destructive death rituals) and 'positive' atheist agenda-setting (it is a gift to the living, not the dead, and a material report of moral materialism). Moreover, if in Bentham's case the display of his dead body was for purposes, in part, of 'delicious profanation' - a kind of 'sly joke against contemporary prejudice and outraged opinion' (Collings 2000: 124) - Indian body donation is constitutive of a more austere atheist materiality that goes beyond the comedic (though Indian atheist material culture is not averse to 'delicious profanation' in other contexts, as we have seen).

This essay has sought to give an account of lived materialism in India and prepare the ground for its more substantial analysis at present and in the future. In characterising body donation as a means of providing material reports of atheist activists' 'moral materialism', our account connects with Keane's (2010) concern to explore how 'people and their relations to other people are mediated by semiotic forms' (ibid: 82). Particularly pertinent is Keane's emphasis on ways in which 'ethical actions' become subject to 'palpable objectifications' (ibid: 74) that enable a person's (ethical) character to become available for inspection or evaluation. He gives the example of an account book. The account book - as a material form - gives 'ethical shape' to commercial actions and makes them available for evaluation. The atheist's donated body is his/her account book in this sense - it is the material form that makes manifest the moral nature of their materialism. Indeed, the reflexive nature of atheist body donation - the way in which the gesture is presented to self and others as 'ethical' - makes it meta-ethical in the sense proposed by Lambek (2010: 32). Though body donation is only one of the ways in which Indian atheist activists have sought to reclaim materials for materialism, this essay has suggested reasons why the atheist's donated body has attained a particularly important stature in the material culture of materialism.

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